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Author(s): Christopher Vecsey

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THE EXCEPTION WHO PROVES THE RULES: ANANSE THE AKAN TRICKSTER

BY

CHRISTOPHER VECSEY

(Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, N.Y., U.S.A.)

Recent studies of the Trickster in world folklore¹ have indicated his role as threat to the rules of societal and cosmic order. He is a paradoxical figure whose antics mock the seriousness of rules, the sacrality of beliefs, and the establishment of rituals. He is a vagabond, an intruder to proper society, an unpredictable liar who throws doubt on the concept of truth itself.

As a folklore figure he is both human and divine, a person and an animal, creative and destructive, a success and failure. His tales are sometimes myths, sometimes legends, sometimes connected with ritual, sometimes not. They can be entertainment, education, a form of humorous rebellion. They can evaluate, explain, and reflect upon realities, thereby making those realities clearer and more profound to the people who tell and hear the tales.

By breaking the patterns of a culture the Trickster helps define those patterns. By acting irresponsibly he helps define responsibility. He threatens, yet he teaches, too. He throws doubt on realities but helps concentrate attention on realities. He crosses supposedly unbreakable boundaries between culture and nature, life and death, and thereby draws attention to those boundaries. Societies "not only tolerate" Trickster tales, but "create and re-create"² them because they serve the vital purpose of questioning and affirming, casting doubt and building faith upon the most important societal concepts.

It is my purpose in this paper to examine the Trickster tales of the Twi-speaking peoples of West Africa, the Ashanti and other Akan. My interest is not in the stories as folklore, the relationships of their motifs to world folklore;³ rather, my aim is to discover the meanings of the Akan Trickster tales to the Akan. I wish to see them in their cultural context. I know that one can find similar episodes of similar Tricksters in the other areas of the world. Elsewhere the

same episodes may have a human, or hero, or deity as the main actor. The environment may differ and the society's attitude toward the tale may differ. One can see, for example, how Americans refashioned their African and European tales to suit their new situations in the New World.⁴ Folklore is a means of cultural communication; I want to see what Trickster tales communicate to the Akan.

In West Africa, as throughout the rest of Africa, the most common prose narratives are Trickster tales. Hare, Tortoise, and Spider are the chief actors, varying from location to location. Tortoise is most popular among the Yoruba; Hare is more prevalent in the grasslands; Spider is most common in the forest areas.⁵ There are also human Tricksters. Among the two million Akan of Ghana and environs the Trickster is Ananse, the Spider.

The Akan are culturally homogeneous, speaking mutually intelligible dialects of Twi. The folklore forms a relatively unified bloc, including proverbs,⁶ music,⁷ and prose narratives.⁸ Not only are the same themes found in Trickster tales among the Ashanti, Fante, Brong and other Akan, but they are told in the same manner, apparently with the same attitudes and applications. With the little available material (there are few collections of Akan folklore), often not indicating the origin, place, people, date, and other important data, it is impossible to reconstruct a regional map of the tales collected and it is worthwhile to think of the Akan as a cultural unit. As many foreign elements as the Akan have adopted, they have incorporated them into Akan patterns, applying their cultural meanings to new rites, gods, and folklore.⁹ It is proper to think of Ananse, the Akan Trickster, as a single character whose tales communicate the same basic meanings to the various Akan groups.

The Akan make great use of oral traditions. Their sacred histories have been memorized and recited by trained specialists.¹⁰ No specialists, however, are needed to recite the Trickster tales or any of the other folktales which the Akan simply call *Anansesem*, that is, Ananse tales. All Anansesem, whether they deal with Ananse or not, are considered to be untrue stories. They are not myths in any sense of the word. Anyone can tell them, although only at night or at a ceremonial occasion, for example, at the funeral of a respected story-teller.¹¹ Before the narrator begins his tale, he will say that the story is not true. The one hundred or more Trickster tales and the

numerous other Anansesem have no apparent connection with Akan ritual; they are simply tales.¹²

Nevertheless, they communicate important concepts to the Akan. In the tales Ananse attacks the very foundations of Akan life, the Supreme Being and the Akan people themselves. He attempts to undermine the ultimate bases of Akan reality, the sources of Akan being, identity and meaning. Whether we call these foundations religious or social does not matter; the traditional Akan make no distinction between religion and society. The important point is that Ananse, through his actions, subverts and revalidates the ultimate bases of Akan life.

The first of these bases is the Supreme Being, Nyame, also known as Onyankopon, Otwereduampon, and Odomankoma. He is the creator, the sky-god, the inexhaustible being, the eldest deity, the giver of rain, sunshine, and help. He is master of life and death, the author of sickness and cures, the one who gave order to the universe, who named all things.¹³

There seems little doubt but that Ellis was mistaken in 1887 when he claimed that the Akan acquired a belief in Nyame from Christians or Muslims.¹⁴ There is evidence for the ancient origin of a belief in and devotion to Nyame among the Akan, through proverbs, myths, drum songs, ancient temples and art.¹⁵ There is also little doubt but that Nyame is an active deity, not removed from the life of the Akan. There is a cult to him among the Akan, although interpreters differ regarding the existence of a priesthood devoted specifically for him. Each person has the right and ability to communicate directly with Nyame, through household shrines consisting of a tree called the seat of Nyame in which offerings are placed. In addition, a priest comes by periodically to water the tree and make special offerings for the family. Moreover, there are specialists within the compounds of chiefs who perform the cult for a village or state.¹⁶ Despite the existence of a myth which states that Nyame removed himself from mankind, he apparently is by no means otiose.

Besides Nyame there exist numerous *abosom*, divinities, nature spirits and the like, which possess powers applicable to certain circumstances. They are generally thought to be invisible, but manifest themselves through aspects of nature. The most powerful of these are Tano the River, Earth Mother (Asase Ya), and a malevolent deity named Nyankopon Kweku, but the number of

abosom is apparently unlimited. At any time a previously unnoticed abosom can make itself known to the Akan.¹⁷ Once direct communication is established between the abosom and the people, a priesthood is created for it and it is called upon for health, fertility, prosperity, protection from witches, and other immediate needs. Each of the abosom has a priesthood and shrines. There are four main types of abosom: tribal-wide, town, family, and personal. All are worshipped. The Akan state that as a person has many needs, a person needs many abosom; it would be unrealistic and unwise to expect anyone to prosper or even survive without recognizing the many abosom.¹⁸

On the other hand, it appears that the Akan think of these abosom as intermediaries, messengers, between themselves and Nyame. Each of the abosom has powers but the source of all power is Nyame. Whether this type of theistic belief can best be described as monotheism, monolatry, or henotheism is not important to the present discussion. Clearly the Akan perform what must be described as religious acts in regard to the abosom. It might be argued that such acts are important enough to warrant the consideration that abosom constitute a separate religious base, apart from Nyame. I shall take this possibility into consideration in the following analysis; however, conceptually the Akan treat the abosom as appendages to Nyame. He holds ultimate power, not they.¹⁹

The second foundation of Akan life is represented by the ancestor spirits. The rituals devoted to the ancestor spirits are the most visible of the Akan religious cults and have led observers to claim that the Akan (like other Africans) are ancestor-worshippers.

There are four major ceremonials which communicate with the ancestor spirits: the Adae, at which ancestors are recalled, honoured, and propitiated, and at which the solidarity of the state is emphasized; the Baya, at which thanksgiving offerings are made to the ancestors for the rice crop and requests for blessings are made for the upcoming rice crop; the Afahye, at which ancestors are offered first fruits of various crops; and the Odwera, at which the tribe is ritually cleansed with the help of the ancestors. In addition, the Akan believe that ancestors visit their living relatives; in order to house them during their visits, the Akan construct stools. The Akan do not worship the stools; rather, each stool is considered empty until an ancestor resides in it, just as an offering shrine is empty until the abosom or Nyame appear. There are numerous

stools: tribal, men's, women's, officials' and family's. Each was designed for certain ancestor spirits.²⁰ While the ancestor visits in the stool, the Akan person can communicate directly with him or her, asking for favours, receiving advice, information and help.

When observers have called the Akan ancestor-worshippers, they have done so in an attempt to demonstrate the supremacy of the ancestors in the religious life at the expense of Nyame. In short, they have said that the Akan worship ancestors, not God. In this sense they have been mistaken; however, if we understand that the ancestors are the powerful symbols of the Akan people themselves, we see that they participate in the foundation of Akan being.

The ancestors are the owners of all Akan land. The living can pass it on to their children but the ancestors actually own it, sustain it, and thus sustain the Akan people. The ancestors represent the political authority of the Akan. They are paradigms of Akan virtue. They promote fertility (no childless Akan can become an ancestor spirit) and pass down the cultural institutions of the Akan.²¹ Furthermore, they are the most important symbols of the two Akan lineage systems, the matrilineal, physical line (*abusa*) and the patrilineal, spiritual line (*ntoro*).²² Each Akan person belongs to two families, both of them essential to his or her concept of identity, and the ancestors represent both.

I am not speaking of individual ancestors or even collections of ancestors. I am speaking of ancestors as a concept, and as such they conceptualize the Akan people as a whole. The individual Akan sees himself not as a unit who happens to be Akan (although here we should remember that each Akan identifies with his or her nation: Ashanti, Fante, etc.), but as a member of the Akan people. Before he identifies himself he sees himself as a part of his people. Before there is "I" there is "we." In short, the Akan person derives his identity from his people; without them he does not exist, he has no reality, no being, no meaning.

In the same way the ancestors derive their meaning and identity from the Akan people as a whole. The ancestor cult is, in reality, a cult of heredity.²³ To say that the Akan ground of being is the Akan people itself is to state a spiritual as well as a physical fact. It is for that reason that the Akan can be said to have two, rather than one, foundations of life: Nyame and the Akan themselves. It would be incorrect to neglect the ultimate importance of the Akan,²⁴ just as it would be to neglect Nyame.

Before examining the Trickster's relationships with Nyame and the Akan people in the Anansesem, I wish to discuss the importance of two aspects of Akan life. The first is kingship. The king represents the Akan before Nyame and he represents Nyame before the Akan.²⁵ Akan histories are usually woven around the deeds of the kings.²⁶ In recent times prospective Akan converts to Christianity have balked at having to renounce allegiance to the king.²⁷ The kings were until recently sovereign rulers, divinely ordained, charismatic, reigning—in the case of the Ashanti—over a million people or more. The king is the main actor in the Adae and Odwera ceremonials, the intermediary between the people and the ancestors, between the people and Nyame.

Yet he is chosen by the people. In the presence of the ancestors he wears his oldest clothes as a sign of deference. He is a central cultic participant but he is not the whole of the Akan people by himself. Akan proverbs attest that the king is powerful but he must know his place, just as the people must know theirs. He is not to think of himself as a great person by himself; to the contrary, he is the holder of a great office, owing his position to Nyame and the Akan people. More important as a symbol of the people is the Golden Stool. Individual kings pass on but the Golden Stool “holds the soul ... of the nation.”²⁸ Nevertheless, the king's influence should not be underestimated. He mediates between the two bases of Akan life.

The second aspect I wish to discuss is priesthood. The abosom choose people to be their representatives among the Akan. They possess their chosen ones, teaching them how to call upon the abosom when needed. The priest then forms a cult and shrine, gaining local adherents.²⁹ Priests are intermediaries between the people and the abosom, leading ultimately to Nyame.

We have thus examined the bases and the intermediaries of Akan life. It remains for us to see how Ananse relates to Nyame, the Akan people, the abosom, the ancestors, the king, and the cultic priests.

Ananse is related to Nyame, first, by name. Nyame is sometimes known as Ananse Kokuroko, or the Great Spider,³⁰ and some Akan think of the two as relatives.³¹ They also share characteristics. Ananse, like Nyame, possesses wisdom and prospers by it.³² One Akan story-teller says of Ananse that “The wisdom of the spider is greater than that of all the world together.”³³

Just as Nyame is thought of as the spiritual father of all people, Ananse is said to be the father of the grandfathers, an ancient Akan ancestor,³⁴ possibly one of the founders of the Twi-speaking nations. In one Ashanti myth it is Ananse who fashions man but Nyame must give him life,³⁵ although other myths have Ananse as the actual creator of the world and man.³⁶

The point to be gained is that Ananse and Nyame are related by blood, by action, and by characteristic, yet they are definitely two separate entities. Nyame is the object of veneration; Ananse is not. Nyame's actions inspire ritual; Ananse's do not. Nyame is considered the provider for the nations; Ananse is not. Nyame is the Great Spider; Ananse is perverting sub-alter-ego.

In the tales Ananse tries to become closer to Nyame. He bargains to become Nyame's messenger (and then proceeds to warp his messages) in order to share in Nyame's prestige, power, and wealth.³⁷ Moreover, he attempts to form a closer alliance with Nyame by proposing to marry his daughter. It is apparent that Ananse desires to be Nyame's son-in-law more than he desires his daughter. Nyame announces that the first person to guess his daughter's secret name will marry her. Ananse learns the name through a clever ploy; however, he fails to win her because of his attempt to imitate Nyame's stately actions. Rather than say the name aloud, Ananse uses talking drums as messengers, and when Nyame cannot understand Ananse's poor drumming, Ananse sends Lizard with the message. When Lizard says the girl's name, Nyame awards him—Lizard—the girl's hand. It is proper for Nyame to employ talking drums and messengers to deliver his statements; Ananse should not be so pompous.³⁸

Not only does Ananse attempt to imitate Nyame, but he also attempts to usurp his prerogatives. In some cases he is successful. In an often-told tale, Ananse desires to own all the stories belonging to Nyame. He wants the stories to be about himself instead of Nyame. In order to accomplish this, he makes an agreement with Nyame: he will exchange a number of wild animals or nature spirits for the stories. Ananse uses trickery to capture hornets, a python, a leopard, and other animals according to different versions, and brings themes to Nyame. Because of his success, all stories are now called *Anansesem* instead of Nyame's stories. Instead of featuring the deeds of Nyame, they recount the escapades of Ananse.³⁹

Ananse's purchase of the tales results from trickery, but not from deceit of Nyame. In another story Ananse fools Nyame and thereby saves his own life after he has failed to save the life of Nyame's mother. Ananse fools Nyame into believing that the abosom want him alive, and so Nyame pardons him.⁴⁰

Ananse's infringement on Nyame's sovereignty is most plain in his control over death. Among the Akan Nyame is said to be the master of death and life. Metaphorically this implies that Nyame is the master of everything, since death is the fact of existence which cannot be avoided. Men are powerless against it, just as they are powerless against Nyame. Nevertheless, Ananse uses death for his own purposes in some instances and escapes from death, thereby mocking Nyame's ultimate power.

In order to gain wealth from Nyame, Ananse promises to take a grain of corn from Nyame and exchange it for a village of people, all of whom he will bring back to Nyame. He travels from town to town, claiming to be Nyame's messenger. He tells the chief of the first town that he has Nyame's grain of corn which must be kept with the cocks. Of course the cocks eat the corn and to avoid Nyame's wrath, the chief gives Ananse a cock. Ananse employs the same ruse at the next town, saying that the cock—Nyame's favorite—must stay with the sheep. They trample it to death and Ananse thereby gains a sheep. Ananse acquires a cow at the next town, using the same trick. Next he exchanges the cow for a dead child (or woman or slave, depending on the version), promising to bring the child to Nyame. Because of the dead child's stench, the children at the next town beat it while it "sleeps," and to avoid Nyame's wrath for having "killed Nyame's favourite child," the chief brings his entire village to Nyame. Thus Ananse fulfills his pledge. At each step in the progression Ananse uses death in order to further his own ends. He is a veritable master of death in his own right.⁴¹

In another tale Ananse feigns death in order to retire to his farm which his family has tended. He has his family bury him on the farm with his eating and cooking utensils and advises them not to visit him for a long period of time. During this time he eats all the crops that ripen.⁴²

In a third tale Ananse travels to the land of the dead, from which no living person may return. He tricks Death (personified) into giving him treasured gold sandals and a gold broom, then escapes

with the gifts. Where no other person could oppose Death, Ananse is successful.⁴³

Ananse is also credited with bringing Death (personified) into contact with humans. Formerly Death ravaged only animals, but through Ananse's greed and disrespect Death finds humans and begins to kill them.⁴⁴ Ananse seems to be intimately associated with death. One Akan tale explains why death is everywhere; another explains in an obvious parody why Ananse is everywhere.⁴⁵ By demonstrating a disrespectful, almost blithely confident, attitude toward death, Ananse flouts Nyame's authority and power.

In addition, Ananse shows no respect for the abosom. He is not awed by their presence when others are afraid. He tries to bully them, use them for his own benefit, even tries to compete with them. When Efu, a hunchback abosom, provides Ananse with rain for his crops, Ananse beats him to death in order to gain even more rain.⁴⁶ When an old woman abosom of the earth gives food to Ananse's son, Ananse attempts to wrest more from her.⁴⁷ When everyone else is afraid to approach a sacred grove, Ananse tricks the abosom to help him destroy it and plant his crops.⁴⁸ Ananse is too proud to respect the abosom; he disregards their commands as he evades Nyame's authority.

The question arises: do the Akan enjoy vicarious rebellion against Nyame and the abosom through the Trickster tales? When Ananse tricks or evades or abuses the sacred, do the Akan identify with him? It would be mistaken to think of the Akan as existentialists struggling to free themselves of supernatural control; however, the stories do offer a more vulgar view of Nyame than one expressed at a family shrine or at a state ceremonial. In one tale Nyame demonstrates a petulant resentment toward Ananse's success in killing a dangerous python. Because Nyame is obliged to give Ananse some wisdom as reward, he throws a pot of wisdom at him, almost splitting him into two pieces.⁴⁹ Ananse certainly challenges Nyame's hegemony. By stating that the Anansesem are not true before reciting them, the story-teller and his audiences can indulge in the exuberance of twitting ultimate rule.

On the other hand, the Trickster tales recognize Nyame and the abosom's powers and authority. When Ananse wants to obtain something, he must go to Nyame to obtain it. In his scheme to exchange the corn for a village of people, Ananse uses the threat of Nyame's power and anger just as he uses the process of death.

Furthermore, Nyame and the abosom punish Ananse for some of his disrespectful misdeeds. Nyame withdraws all water from Ananse because of his treatment of Efu the hunchback. He also decides against awarding His daughter to Ananse because of his pompous behaviour. When Ananse refuses to follow the directives of the old woman of the earth, he suffers from sores and scabs. When Ananse disobeys some river abosom, he becomes physically deformed.⁵⁰

Even with regard to death, on two occasions Ananse finds himself unable to control the powers he attempts to use. In one case a stone abosom kills him when he asks it the wrong question,⁵¹ in another case he is killed by a witch's sword that refuses to follow his commands.⁵²

The general picture, therefore, which emerges from Ananse's relationships with Nyame and the abosom is one of challenge to but reinforcement of authority. The tales indicate Ananse's ability to violate Nyame's rule but they continue to affirm that rule. In effect, Ananse is the exception who probes and proves Nyame's rule.

Ananse's disrespect for Nyame's authority is matched by his contempt for the authority of Akan society. His relationship with the people of the tales is even more antagonistic than his relationship with Nyame.

In story after story Ananse fools his friends, neighbours, and family members in order to supply his own needs, which usually consist of food. He steals Lizard's garden after Lizard has performed all the work.⁵³ He steals the food of Leopard's kingdom.⁵⁴ After he kills Efu the hunchback, he attempts to blame his friend for the murder. Because he so often deceives people, Akan story-tellers comment: "Woe to one who would put his trust in Anansi—a sly, selfish, and greedy person."⁵⁵

Ananse is not above stealing a fiancé from his best friend, Donkey. Through a complicated series of schematic episodes Ananse dissuades the girl from marrying Donkey, marries her himself, and moves far away, leaving Donkey to tend his farm.⁵⁶ I could continue to list the numerous anti-social acts of Ananse; let these suffice as examples. Most frequently he breaks public trust during a famine. While others starve, he wishes to gorge himself.⁵⁷

Ananse's greed is directed also against his family. When during a famine he finds a magic pot which provides him with food, he keeps it to himself, refusing to share it with his family members. Because

of his greed, his children and wife distrust him and together they destroy the source of food.⁵⁸ As a result, he and his family vie for sustenance through many of the tales, and when Ananse is successful in one of his schemes, he hoards his rewards rather than share with his divisive brood. In a society in which harmonious family life is emphasized, Ananse's family stands out as a disjunctive example.

On occasion Ananse works for the benefit of a particular village or a particular person, as when he saves a village from an attacking giant python. It should be noted, however, that when he does help mankind he is usually acting with the hope of receiving a reward or payment. Furthermore, when he helps people, they find it hard to believe. For example, when he kills a bird which has been threatening a town, he announces his success, but the townsfolk answer: "Oh, that's Kwaku Ananse, he is a well-known liar, perhaps he is not speaking the truth."⁵⁹ The characters in the tales know about his anti-social tendencies.

Is there any justification for calling him a Culture-Hero as well as a Trickster? Whereas it is true that he plays a role in creation and is considered an ancient ancestor, he is hardly a figure who brings cultural benefits to the Akan people. Instead he brings death,⁶⁰ contradiction,⁶¹ serpents and monsters,⁶² and debt.⁶³ Especially interesting is his introduction of debt into the world, since the Ashanti say that what joins them together, makes them Ashanti, is debt.

Ananse does introduce wisdom among the Akan, but he does so only through anger and accident. Indeed, his wish is to hide all the wisdom of the world from the people. He places it in a pot and tries to carry it to the top of a tree; however, he makes no progress since he is holding the large pot in front of him and his legs cannot reach the tree. His son, spying on him, tells him that it would be better if he carried it on his back. Ananse realizes that he can not possibly have all the wisdom of the world in his possession since his son obviously is giving him good advice. In anger at his own stupidity he throws the pot down to the ground. It breaks and its contents scatter to the people.⁶⁴

Ananse is also credited with introducing weaving and the hoe among the Akan; however, a close reading of the tales indicates that on the contrary he introduces these two important cultural items to the British instead of to the Akan. The latter have to wait for the former to arrive before receiving the devices.⁶⁵ Tricksters in other

folklore also play the role of Culture-Hero, but not Ananse. For the most part he brings the people destructive and dangerous innovations. On two occasions he prevents cultural items from reaching the Akan. The one case in which he provides the Akan with a useful item is through an accident, veritably against his will.

Ananse is not a Culture-Hero. He certainly is not a paradigm of virtue; to the contrary, his actions are exceedingly anti-social. He fosters disharmony in the group and in his family; he eats others' food; his actions contradict the ideal of solidarity expressed by the Akan. Why, then, are his tales so popular? Part of the answer lies in his contradictions regarding Akan ideals.

I have tried to show that the Akan feel a very strong obligation to the social order. The Akan individual sees himself as a member of society before he sees himself as an individual. Akan society has a closely-knit structure, each person having a sharply-defined position in the matrilineal blood clan, the patrilineal spirit clan, the village and the state, all within the framework of nature's laws and in relationship to Nyame's power.⁶⁶ For each position the individual has rights and duties which are clearly prescribed. These are not simply the obligations of citizenship. Far more important, they are the obligations of identity. The person is who he is because of his position within the structure of Akan society. He is because he is Akan; he must act in the prescribed manner or risk his very being. Any deviation from the societal norm threatens his existence; banishment is the ultimate punishment because separation from his people means separation from his ground of being.

Ananse, on the other hand, breaks societal rules, violates the trust of his people, and as often as not escapes without punishment; sometimes he even prospers through his misdeeds. He is contemptuous of Akan authority, just as he shows contempt for Nyame's authority. Through Ananse's tales, the Akan individual experiences vicarious freedom from the societal boundaries which bind so tightly. (The boundaries are so tight because they are so necessary.) Ananse gives Akan society the opportunity to mock Nyame's authority; he gives the individual the opportunity to mock society's authority. He is able to do what the ordinary Akan cannot: act unscrupulously with relative impunity. By so doing he calls the most sacrosanct of Akan institutions into question.

That is not to say that the Trickster destroys the fabric of Akan society. The Akan individual may applaud his successes but he does

not attempt to emulate his anti-social techniques; he enjoys Ananse's illicit schemes but does not approve of them. Ananse does not teach morals when he is victorious. It is when he fails that the Akan draw ethical conclusions.⁶⁷

And fail he does. As often as not the persons whom Ananse attempts to trick work their revenge. When Ananse tries to blame the death of Efu on his friend, the friend sees through Ananse's ploy and informs him that Nyame has been displeased with Efu. The friend tells Ananse that Nyame will give him a reward for killing the hunchback. Ananse admits his actions, hoping for gain, and brings the body to Nyame who punishes Ananse for the death. When Ananse steals Lizard's farm, Lizard manages to trick Ananse into returning it.

Not only does Ananse often lose what he has gained through deceit. Frequently he is publicly shamed for his crimes. When he feigns death in order to eat his family's food, his wife finally notices that the crops are disappearing. She suspects thieves. At the advice of a diviner she makes a life-size figure of sticky gum and leaves it in the garden where Ananse finds it at night. Infuriated that someone is intruding into his garden, Ananse challenges the dummy and becomes stuck in it through the familiar "tar-baby" sequence. In the morning his family and neighbours find him and realize his plot. He becomes ashamed and escapes to the dark rafters of a nearby home, a formula ending for the many tales in which Ananse is shamed by his unlawful deeds.⁶⁸ (In another version, however, Ananse claims that he has visited the land of the dead and returned because the ancestors have told him that he is not ready to die. The people believe his story and he turns it to profit.⁶⁹)

In addition to presenting Ananse's punishments and embarrassments, the tales offer a picture of a relatively well-functioning society. While Ananse is stealing, his neighbours are co-operating; while Ananse is scheming, his neighbours are planting their crops; while Ananse is violating rules, his neighbours are obeying them.

Hence Ananse's often-successful antics must be viewed in the broader societal context which the tales portray. Ananse threatens societal order but the other characters in the stories maintain order. Ananse creates doubt about the permanence and power of Akan institutions; the other characters reaffirm faith in them. Ananse breaks the people's rules but the rules still stand. In regard to the

Akan people as in regard to Nyame, Ananse is the exception who probes and proves the rules.

In his relationships with ancestors, kings, and priesthood, Ananse further illustrates his role of casting doubt on sacred institutions. The ancestors play a very small role in the Anansesem; when they are mentioned, however, Ananse is trying to take advantage of them. It is they who provide him with the food-producing pot which he later abuses. He persuades Donkey to tend his farm while he is "away," so that the ancestors may be cared for. Most significantly, when he claims to have returned from the land of the dead, he charges the people in order for them to hear the messages he has supposedly brought from the ancestors to them. He uses the ancestors to suit his devious purposes but the tales themselves do not throw the ancestors into disrepute.

The stories present a less flattering picture of kings. Sometimes they are lazy, greedy, spiteful, jealous. Ananse challenges their authority more than he does Nyame's, and is more often successful. On the other hand, they are often just, regal, and wise, especially in tales which closely resemble stories told about Nyame. In these cases the king appears as the rightful symbol of Nyame on earth. Even when they make errors their office—kingship itself—is justified.

Priests, like ancestors, play small roles in the Anansesem. They appear as givers of advice, sometimes correct, sometimes not. True to character, Ananse uses the priests for his own ends, particularly when he is feigning sickness and death. In one version Ananse plays the role of dead man so convincingly that the diviner-priest believes him.⁷⁰ More strikingly, Ananse throws doubt on the institution of diviner-priest when he "returns from the land of the dead" and gets caught in the sticky dummy. By fooling gullible people into paying him to hear messages from their ancestors, he suggests that diviner-priests who carry such messages in real life might be fakes as he is. Aside from Ananse's own perverse actions, however, the Anansesem give no instance of a priest subverting his office. Again, Ananse is the exception.⁷¹

We see, in conclusion, that Ananse raises doubts about the very foundations of Akan life, particularly Nyame and the Akan people themselves. We also see that the Anansesem serve to resolve the doubts raised by Ananse. In short, the Trickster tales attack and af-

firm those foundations. In effect, the Akan eschew "blind faith" in their ultimate realities. Instead they incorporate doubt into faith, making that faith stronger and more profound.

NOTES

1. See B. Babcock-Abrahams, "A tolerated margin of mess": the Trickster and his tales reconsidered', *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 11, 1975, 147-186, and L. Makarius, 'Le mythe du "Trickster"', *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 175, 1969, 17-46.
2. Babcock-Abrahams, 186.
3. See K. W. Clarke, *A motif-index of the folktales of Culture-Area V West Africa*, unpublished Ph.D dissertation, Indiana University 1958, and S. Feldman, *African myths and tales*, New York: Dell 1973, 10f.
4. See B. R. Hampton, 'On identification and Negro Tricksters', *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 31, 1967, 55-65, and W. D. Pierson, 'An African background for American Negro folktales?' *Journal of American Folklore* 84, 1971, 204-14.
5. M. Diarrassouba, *Le lièvre et l'araignée. Deux animaux des contes de l'Ouest Africain*, Abidjan: L'Université d'Abidjan 1970, 153f.
6. J. B. Christensen, 'The role of proverbs in Fante culture', in E. P. Skinner (ed.), *Peoples and cultures of Africa. An anthropological reader*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday 1973, 509.
7. J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *African music in Ghana*, Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press 1963, 3. See also his *Funeral dirges of the Akan people*, Achimota: 1955, and *Drumming in Akan communities in Ghana*, London: Nelson 1963.
8. W. H. Barker and C. Sinclair, *West African folk-tales*, Northbrook, Ill.: Metro 1972, (r.p. of 1917), 16f.
9. K. A. Busia, 'The Ashanti', in D. Forde (ed.) *African worlds*, London: OUP 1954, 191.
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11. J. Berry, *Spoken art in West Africa*, London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1961, 18, and H. Courlander, *The hat-shaking dance and other tales from the Gold Coast*, New York: Harcourt Brace 1957, 104.
12. A. B. Douglas, 'The Anansesem in Gold Coast schools', *Gold Coast Review* 5, 1931, 130f., and R. S. Rattray, 'Some aspects of West African folk-lore' *Journal of the African Society* 28, 1928, 10.
13. See T. Addae, 'Some aspects of Ashanti religious beliefs', *Africa* 25, 1970, 162-165, and R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti proverbs*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1916, 17-26.
14. See H. St. John T. Evans, 'The Akan doctrine of God', in E. W. Smith (ed.) *African ideas of God*, London: Edinburgh House Press 1950, 244f.
15. See Addae, 159-161, and Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs* 141-143.
16. See S. K. Chatterji, *Africanism. The African personality*, Calcutta: Bengal Publishers 1960, 113-116, and Evans, 253.
17. S. K. Akesson, 'The secret of Akom', *African Affairs* 49, 1950, 237-240.
18. R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti*, New York: Negro Universities, 1969, 150.
19. J. B. Danquah, *The Akan doctrine of God. A fragment of Gold Coast ethics and religion*, London: r.p. Cass 1968.
20. S. Coffin, 'Stool worship in Ashanti', *Canadian Geographical Journal* 30, 1945, 34-41.

21. See M. Fortes, 'Some reflections on ancestor worship in Africa', in M. Fortes and G. Dieterlen (eds.) *African systems of thought*, London: OUP 1965, 134f.
22. See M. J. Herskovits, 'The Ashanti ntoro: a re-examination', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 57, 1937, 287-296.
23. See Ch. le Cœur, *Le culte de la génération et l'évolution religieuse et sociale en Guinée*, Paris: Leroux 1932, 11-34.
24. See S. G. Williamson, *Akan religion and the Christian faith. A comparative study of the impact of two religions*, ed. by K. A. Dickson. Accra: Ghana Universities Press 1965, 87-96.
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31. W. H. Barker, 'Nyamkpon and Ananse in Gold Coast folklore', *Folk-Lore* 30, 1919, 158.
32. Douglas, 130.
33. In Barker and Sinclair 25.
34. J. B. Danquah, *Gold Coast. Akan laws and customs and the Akim Abuakwa Constitution*, London: Routledge 1928, 250 n. 2.
35. H. Tegnæus, *Le héros civilisateur. Contribution à l'étude ethnologique de la religion et de la sociologie africaines*, (Studia Ethnographica Upsaliensia 2) Stockholm: Petterssons 1950, 55.
36. Feldman, 14.
37. See M. J. and F. S. Herskovits, 'Tales in pidgin English from Ashanti', *Journal of American Folklore* 50, 1937, 60-62.
38. H. Courlander, *The King's drum and other African stories*, London: Hart-Davis 1963, 36-40, 114f.
39. Barber and Sinclair, 29-31; Courlander, *Hat-shaking dance* 3-8; Herskovits and Herskovits, 53-57; R. S. Rattray *Akan-Ashanti folk-tales*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1930, 54-59.
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41. Peggy Appiah, *Ananse the spider. Tales from an Ashanti village*, New York: Pantheon 1966, 3-26, and Douglas, 132f.
42. Peggy Appiah, *Tales of an Ashanti father*, London: Deutsch 1967, 149-157, and Courlander, *Hat-shaking dance* 20-24.
43. Appiah, *Ashanti father*, 61-68.
44. *Ibid* 139-145.
45. Douglas, 135.
46. Appiah, *Ananse the spider* 115-121, and E. J. P. Brown, *Gold Coast and Asianti Reader*, Book 2, London: Crown Agents 1929, 92-96.
47. Appiah, *Ashanti father*, 18-24.
48. Brown, 73-76.
49. Appiah, *Ashanti father* 11-18.
50. Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti folk-tales*, 66-71.
51. Peggy Appiah, *The pineapple child and other tales from Ashanti*, London: Deutsch 1969, 142-145.
52. Corlander, *Hat-shaking dance* 1957, 88-92.
53. *Ibid.* 70-72.
54. Appiah, *Ananse the spider* 97-104.
55. In Barker and Sinclair, 25.

56. Appiah, *Ananse the spider*, 73-87.
57. Courlander, *Hat-shaking dance*, 106.
58. Appiah, *Ananse the spider*, 59-64.
59. Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti folk-tales*, 181.
60. Herskovits and Herskovits, 171.
61. See Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti folk-tales*, 106-109.
62. Barker and Sinclair, 89-94.
63. Courlander, *Hat-shaking dance*, 77-79; Herskovits and Herskovits 91f; Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti folk-tales*, 4f.
64. *Ananse the spider*, 149-152, and Barker and Sinclair, 32-34.
65. *Hat-shaking dance* 86f; Herskovits and Herskovits, 66f; Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti folk-tales*, 42f.
66. Cf. H. Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, Accra: Presbyterian Book Depot 1961, 5, 61; and R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti law and constitution*, New York: Negro Universities, 1969, 368.
67. Courlander, *Hat-shaking dance*, 104.
68. *Ibid.*, 21-24.
69. Appiah, *Ashanti father*, 149-157.
70. Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti folk-tales*, 140-145.
71. In his role as bogus priest Ananse brings up a fascinating but tenuous topic: witches. Among the Akan, witches are the counterparts of priests. Like priests, they are powerful individuals, possessed by abosom; however, priests serve the people whereas witches attempt to destroy the people. They are anti-social forces par excellence. They ignore the authority of Nyame and the authority of the Akan in their quest for personal power at the expense of everyone else. They resemble Ananse in their egotism and anti-social behaviour. Furthermore, they share characteristics with Ananse and spiders which are quite suggestive. First, witches, like Ananse, are unnaturally fond of food, especially meat. Second, they use spider webs as part of their destructive paraphernalia. If a spider web entangles an Akan, he will suspect a witch. Witches walk on spider webs; in addition, they attach them to their doors while they sleep so they will be warned if anyone should enter. Furthermore, witches hurt each other by cutting one another's spider webs. Third, witches keep their knowledge hidden in a pot in a way similar to that of Ananse when he tries to hoard his wisdom. I do not mean to imply that Ananse is an out-and-out witch, despite these connections. Rather I am suggesting that Akan society incorporates anti-social elements into its structure, Ananse and witches being two examples. To have an anti-social figure as the main folkloric character seems to me an act of ontological bravado. Accepting witches as part of the system seems to require like courage. For a discussion of Akan witches, see Debrunner, *op. cit.*; Jack Goody, *Anomie in Ashanti?* *Africa* 27, 1957, 356-363, and Barbara E. Ward, *Some observations on religious cults in Ashanti*, *Africa* 26, 1956, 47-61.